

## Interview with Rudy Alonzo

By Robert McPherson

RM: First of all this is an interview with Rudy Alonzo. He is in California. This is a phone interview. Today is January 4, 2008. Rudy is going to talk to us a little bit about his experience with the missile program here in Blanding.

RM: Could you give us some background, perhaps how old you were, where you came from, your civilian capacity there, etc.?

RA: Okay, let's see. At the time it was 69, 68 really, so that would be what, 33. I was 33 years old at the time. I was employed previous to that by the Adim Corporation. I was in Tucson. And I got hired on by RCA to go to White Sands. Upon arriving at White Sands I was told that the job really wasn't at White Sands because I was at White Sands previous to that when I was in the military and that I would be in Blanding, Utah. I said, "Okay, no problem." So I took the company vehicle that they gave me in Tucson to Blanding and that is when I met my associate that I was working with on the site. That was about it I think just to get me up to Blanding.

RM: Okay, great. You said that you were about 33 years old at the time. What kind of training had you had prior to this?

RA: Okay, let's see. I was in the military and I was working as a fire control mechanic which means that I worked on the H-ACS, missiles, Nike missile, and the Hercules missile, the fire defense system. I was a computer technician. I took care of all the radars. I took care of the main computer that controlled all the aspects of the missile defense system. Then when I left the military I was hired on by IBM as a computer technician there also, actually a data repair man they called it. You took care of all the data inputs from all the card systems; you did sorting, punching, analyzing, printing. It was an environment that was very mechanical compared to the stuff that is done today. That was the extent of it.

RM: And when you first came to Blanding, you were at the Black Mesa Missile Site, is that where you reported in to?

RA: I don't remember the name, but that was the only site that was in the area, so I imagine that was it. We were part of Green River Research Center, I was told. Green River was the one that fired the missile. We took the information that was off the radar at Green River and then transferred it over to White Sands so that it looked like all the radars were stacked one on top of the other.

RM: Okay, so when you arrived to Black Mesa, approximately how many people would you say were there at the base? How big was the base? And could you describe the base, the physical layout of the base and what you encountered when you first arrived?

RA: I remember we had, I believe it was three vans. A van housed about, I think 4 people in it that did the actual plotting, that see the actual missile in flight. Another one was used to bring the information in from Green River. My van that I worked in was called the chain van. They took the information that Green River supplied to me and I made sure the data was pure and everything off a transmittable state where it can get to White Sands. During an actual missile tracking my equipment would work almost automatically. What I would do after they fired a missile is I would go into the tracking van and sit there and watch the other guys do their job. So I actually didn't do that much. I just needed to make sure that my equipment was up and running and was functioning properly.

RM: What you are describing, I think is actually just outside of Blanding, a place called Shirt Tail Corner and was not at Black Mesa, is that right?

RA: That is true. Yes, I believe we were south or southeast of Blanding itself.

RM: Okay, so does the name of Shirt Tail Corner ring a bell with you?

RA: What?

RM: Does the name of Shirt Tail Corner ring a bell with you?

RA: I believe it did. Yes.

RM: So you were in that area? Okay, I know exactly where you were then. You were not actually at Black Mesa. Black Mesa is quite a ways away from where you were located. And they were also a part of the program. Did you have any interaction with the people that were out on Black Mesa? I mean, they did actual firing, not just from Green River, but also off Black Mesa. Were you involved in that at all?

RA: No, I was not involved in that at all.

RM: Okay. When you came to Blanding, where were you originally from? Were you from California?

RA: Well, I was Tucson, Arizona at the time when I was hired by RCA.

RM: Yeah, but where did you grow up as a boy?

RA: I grew up in New York City.

RM: So, as a New Yorker, what was your impression, your first impression when you came to Blanding?

RA: You blink when you went through the town and you missed it. That's what it was. I think when I was there, there was only 1,200 people in the town itself. There were, I



believe, two motels, no three motels, a movie theater, a grocery store that I remember, and one café – Phil Acton's Café where we used to go to all the time. That was the extent of it. If you had to do anything you went over to Monticello or down to Mexican Hat where they had the other stuff. Blanding was a real small, sleepy little town. 9:00 the sidewalks were rolled up and put away. There were no activities going on whatsoever, except for the guys that were out of high school and didn't go any where or the guys that were working at the site. That's about it.

RM: I want to get into that in just a minute. You mention that Mexican Hat had the other stuff. What other stuff did they have that you are referring to?

RA: It was activities that the guys did in town. You got off of work, there was nothing else to do. You either went to the bowling alleys in Monticello or you went and saw the sites that were down in Mexican Hat. That was about it.

RM: I see. Very good. Where did you live during this time you were at the missile tracking site?

RA: A hotel that was on Main Street. I forgot the name of it. But then there was another hotel called the Blanding Hotel that I stayed at later on because I met the owner of the hotel and his name was Eugene Blickenstaff. He was the security guard that I got to be friendly with. That was the reason I moved over. He said, "I have a motel, why don't you come over and live in my place." I said okay and so I did that.

RM: I guess there were a dozen of you that were manning the site, 24 hours 7 days a week. Is that about right?

RA: Yeah. It seems that it was a small handful, probably about a dozen or so. 12-15, somewhere in that range.

RM: You were there from 1968-1969, a total of about 9-10 months, you say?

RA: I think I was. I was rehashing some of that stuff and I got there I believe in April of 1969, and I left somewhere around May of, wait a minute – April of 1968 and I left around May of 1969. So I was there for about 13 months.

RM: I would like to really question you a little bit about the interaction that you had with local people. We've got newspaper accounts of things that were going on there at the missile site and I think we have a little bit of information about the tracking system, but you don't get much about how people interacted. I'm very interested in knowing, your impressions, any experiences you would like to share, and then after that talk a little bit about what the other people were doing that you were with. How the other, I'm going to use the word "outsiders" interacted with other people. First, let's start with you. What was your experience here initially and at the end of 13 months.

RA: Oh, my experience was that, I came from New York City and I was used to people being around you and going to different places and having facilities that you could go to. When you got a small town, as I said before, you only have one movie theater and a post office, one restaurant, three hotels or motels, but you know the people were friendly towards me. There was no animosity or anything else. They treated me pretty well. They kept to themselves to an extent because I was an outsider at the time. I got to be friendly with an individual called Terry Hunt. He was one of the people that worked out at the site. His family and his friends were probably more to the Indian trade. They had a trading post and Terry would go up to the trading post with his father and uncles, bring back artifacts that the Indians put together and crafted. His family had a store and I would go there sometimes with him, and look at all the marvelous things that the Indians put together. I was amazed at the handicraft that they were able to do. It was there that I met my future wife. I didn't know it at the time, but she came back from her first semester of college and we got to be friendly, and the next thing I knew before I left we were married. That's about it on that part.

RM: You mentioned that there were local people working at the site. How many were actually working at the site, in addition to the 12-15 people that were hired by the government to do the tracking?

RA: I think it was only 2, no it was 3. Terry Hunt was one, Eugene Blickenstaff was the other one, he was the security guard, and I believe we had one other individual that was a tracker, that was a native to the area. Otherwise the rest of us were hired and we came as contractors for RCA. There may have been another individual, but I can't think of any one.

RM: How about the other people? I want to ask a little about your experience too, but how about the other men that were there as far as dating local women? Was that a fairly common thing or was that a hard circuit to break into?

RA: Well, most of the guys stuck together. We used to go to Monticello to the bowling alley. As I recall there wasn't that much dating going on, if you want to call it that. My dating turned out because I met her at the trading post that Terry ran. Other than that I don't know of any other individuals running around or dating the local girls. I don't recall going together as a group. When I did marry Sharon, the community seemed to open up a little bit more and I was able to go to several more social functions at the churches and stuff like that. Prior to that, as far as I know, there was no dating between the locals and those from the outside.

RM: Was there any friction with the other people? When the CCCs came in the 30s to Blanding there was a large infusion of outsiders into the local community and in fact, there were a lot of them from New York. There was friction. It was a much larger group and so it would have stood out a lot more, but there was a fair amount of friction according to some people. So, I'm just wondering. Most of the people you had were, 1) bachelors, 2) probably fairly well educated people, and might have been a little more sensitive perhaps. Can you comment on that?



RA: I believe you are true in that. We were all technicians. We were all somewhat highly trained. We had a responsibility that we were hired to do and nothing else. I don't recall anyone being involved in gambling or alcoholism or anything like that. We were a pretty tight little group; a small amount, a handful of 12 that were there. I never recall any friction whatsoever between the outsiders and the people that were residing in town. I can't think of anything else to say about that because I don't recall anything occurring socially that way.

RM: I'm going to assume when you mention Sharon she was LDS?

RA: Yes, she was.

RM: How did the family react when you came in as a non-LDS person from the outside and obviously from a very different background than what Sharon had experienced?

RA: Hey, I tell you what. The only person that I had any friction with was her stepmother. Her father accepted me right off the bat because, although he didn't work at the site he was familiar with what was going on there. He realized that the people that were at the site were not trouble makers or anything else. She, her name was Grace, she was from Australia. So she had a different mindset compared to the other people that were in town. But I went to church once. I was accepted. I came from a Roman Catholic background so I was somewhat familiar with the Bible and then when I went to one of their nonreligious meetings, a bunch of people were amazed at the knowledge that I had about the Old Testament, although I knew nothing whatsoever about the Book of Mormon. We struck it off pretty well but I did come from somewhat of a religious background. And it did tie in somewhat with their training other than the modern revelations that they received. I didn't anything about that.

RM: Now, you said the Old Testament. Did you mean the Old Testament, or the New Testament?

RA: Both the old and the new. I was more familiar with the old then I was with the new.

RM: That's interesting. Why is that? Usually the Catholic church taught more from the New Testament, I think.

RA: Well, I think I was somewhat of a rebel when I was in the Catholic church. I rebelled a lot on some of the things they were trying to tell me. By going back to the Old Testament and becoming almost a scholar of the Old Testament, I was able to bring up points that they didn't want to bring up in the church and to point out why the New Testament came about. It was all based on the Old Testament so I think the things they were trying to tell my about the New Testament did not really jive with the Old Testament. When I say I was almost a scholar on the Old Testament I really studied hard on it, even being a boy of 14, 15, 16 years old when I left the Catholic church. I had more of a knowledge than most people did about the Old Testament.

RM: That's very interesting. So, a couple points of clarification. Sharon's family name was what?

RA: Hunt. A prominent family in Blanding at the time.

RM: Right, so is this the Ray Hunt or John Hunt?

RA: Mostly I believe it was Ray.

RM: Ray Hunt. So who was Sharon's dad?

RA: Ralph.

RM: Ralph Hunt. These are small details but it's just kind of interesting because I know all of them. So, as you started to date did that lead you to wanting to learn about Mormonism or was this something that happened before?

RA: I was introduced to the Book of Mormon prior to that, but I really didn't read it. And then when I got an opportunity in Blanding, Eugene Blickenstaff and I sat down one night. He asked me if I had any questions and I told him I did. And he said write everything down that you want to ask me and so I sat down with a legal pad and had four pages of stuff that I wanted to question him on. He was able to answer all my questions and it sparked more of a curiosity in me. This individual knew more than anybody else that I knew about the Bible and I thought it was something to look in to. We sat there many a night when we didn't have a mission going on and discussed more aspects of the Bible and he introduced me more and more to the Book of Mormon and how it interfaced with the Bible and how it reinforced the things that I knew. I thought maybe this was something to look into. I didn't join the church because a lot of people joined the church because you were dating a Mormon girl. I said, no that's not the case. I joined the church because I felt it was something I could look into, I could probably live the religion because it was almost like the Old Testament in a sense because of some of the beliefs they had.

RM: Very Interesting.

RA: I was baptized into the church and shortly after being baptized I became more and more interested and learned more and more about the Book of Mormon. We were married January 24 and I believe I was baptized on February 3 or 4 or 5, somewhere in that range.

RM: So the family did not mind your not being a Mormon before you got married?

RA: Oh, no, no, no. In fact one of her uncles and aunts – it was Joe and Freda – welcomed me into their home to dinners and family gatherings and were very open to



talk to me. The same thing with the rest of them. John and Ray and the rest of the Hunt family never had a problem with me and I never had a problem with them.

RM: As you continued on, after you got accepted more into the LDS community, did that make any difference with the people that you worked with?

RA: Not at all. I never saw any friction whatsoever between those that were non members and those who were members. The only thing that struck some of them somewhat odd was that on Fast Sundays the kids were coming over to the nonmembers homes to get something to eat. That struck them as odd. Anyways, it was a prominent community almost in a sense and yet the kids weren't eating on Sundays. I told them what it was -- it was Fast Sunday and the kids were the ones doing it on their own, not because their families were picking them out and not letting them eat.

RM: Are there any experiences on the non-military side, the non tracking side and so forth as far as your living here in Blanding that you would like to share? Then we want to talk a little bit about the tracking and the things you were doing there.

RA: I think what comes to mind at this point is that I never saw a kite whatsoever in Blanding. There was an individual who brought a kite in from some other location. He tried flying it, got in the back of a pickup truck and was running up and down the street trying to get this thing to fly. I said hey, wait a minute guys. These were the guys from the site by the way. You guys are going about this all wrong. So I sat down and demonstrated to them how to fly a kite and I was able to just stand in one spot, the air just right, and away the kite went. Everyone was amazed at that. I didn't know why. So what I did later on I made my own kite because my father was a good kite maker, so I turned out to be a good kite maker myself. I was going at least two or three miles outside of town and had a tremendous amount of string on this kite and I put this up in the air six or eight hundred feet up. It was really up there. And the thing broke free from me because of the winds at the high elevation. Anyway, I got back to town and everyone knew it was me because they had never seen anything like this before. They rescued my kite and gave it back to me. Most of the stuff that we did was going to the bowling alley in Monticello. We had a pretty good time there. I learned how to bowl and I'm not a great bowler, but the technique that I learned and participated in I was able to grow with it later on in life. I taught one of my kids how to bowl and he was a pretty good bowler, Matt.

RM: There were missiles that were fired from Green River that went astray. Were you involved in any of those?

RA: I don't recall. Everything that we had always came past us to White Sands. I don't recall anyone saying that anything went astray and had to be destroyed.

RM: What about the evacuation of Dry Valley and the area that was in the path of the fired missiles?

RA: I never heard anything about that. No one ever said anything about accidents or mishaps or anything else. I think that they did say they were doing a launching and people were being moved out of ranches and stuff like that as safety precautions. But I was not involved; I did not know anything about that.

RM: What kind of volume of missile firing was going on while you were there? Once a month you fired two or how did it work?

RA: I thought it was more than that. There were some weeks we didn't do anything and there were other weeks when it was almost daily. We were out there early in the morning and late at night they were still doing firings. I think the most we had was three days, not three firings in a day. I think that occurred because we all talked about how they were sure putting a lot up there. That was 40 years ago. I don't remember the exact dates.

RM: When they would fire if you had three firings in a day, each firing would represent only one missile being fired at a time?

RA: That is true, yes.

RM: Your job then was to track from the launch at Green River down to White Sands, New Mexico.

RA: Well, we physically couldn't track the launch itself. We had to rely on the launch radars to put our radars on to the right spot and the elevation was high enough that our radars would then pick it up, traverse it across us and before it impacted on White Sands, we would lose it. By that time White Sands already had it.

RM: Right.

RA: So actually three radars at one particular time were tracking three different sites that were looking at this missile either from the launch, to the transition, then down to the impact area. I did not physically see the launch itself. I did not physically see the impact at White Sands.

RM: You probably don't remember this, but roughly how many miles is it from Green River to White Sands? Could you estimate, and I'm making this up, but for instance of the four hundred miles that the missile traveled you would track it for 300 of the 400 or something like that. Could you give me an idea of what you were actually tracking?

RA: I think it was in the neighborhood of 700 or 800 miles. Like I said, as soon as it hit the horizon, we had it to track and we had it until it hit the horizon on the other end. We were the middle part of this which was actually tracking itself. Green River had the acquisition of it and then White Sands would follow it on the termination of it.

RM: Now as you tracked it you would not have any way of controlling or influencing the missile in flight?



RA: I was just a receiver. We were not doing any physical control. I did work with the military where we did control the missile. It was my job to make sure the computer was able to track the missile as soon as it left the rail and put it to its phasing and then impact on a target. That I was able to control, but the missiles that were launched out of Green River I had no control over whatsoever.

RM: Of course they were not really carrying warheads. They were just dummy rounds, right?

RA: Yeah. That's all it was. It was testing reentry shields and things like that. That's what we were mostly involved with to make sure that it was able to come back or able to do whatever they had to do. There were no warheads as far as I know that were ever launched.

RM: When you say reentry shields, could you explain that?

RA: Well I think that they were trying to look at different entries back into the atmosphere again. Shallow and steep to make sure that the shielding on the missile did not get to the point, if they did have a warhead on it, it would disintegrate the warhead on entry. I wasn't involved in the actual trajectories. But that's what the focus was. The mission was to find out if you come in at a certain angle what it would do and how it would impact the missile itself.

RM: What height were these missile being fired at?

RA: That was classified. We were never told that, but I could extrapolate by going into the computer and looking at the stuff that was there. I wanted to, but I never bothered to do it. I said that's not my part of the job so I'm not going to do it. I had to do that when I worked for the Army determining height and speed and everything like that but when it came to the ones at Blanding, I didn't bother. In fact, half the time that I was there, I was always with the tracking guys.

RM: So what was your job? If the tracking guys were doing the tracking, what were you doing? What was your function at the site?

RA: My function was to make sure that we acquired the data that was coming down to us from the radar at Green River and to make sure that they were at a point for it to have enough signal strength to be transmitted over to White Sands to their radars so they could track the missile as we were tracking it. We had three missile sites back one on top of the other and so that way all the radars were looking at the same point and time and the same spot in space as we were looking. It was like we had one huge radar and called it the launch, the transition through space, and then to the impact. Once my data was confirmed accurate we were all calibrating to the same point, I had nothing else to do. It ran automatically.

RM: When a missile did impact at White Sands how much of an area did the explosion cover? I guess what I'm getting at is you know some of the missiles, and these were coming out of Green River. There were some that did not make it and they impacted in Dry Valley and some other places.

RA: I heard about that.

RM: I'm asking there obviously was no warhead on it, but what kind of radius of destruction would be created by that missile impacting? Do you have any idea about that?

RA: We were never told that. I never saw an impact site myself. When I was at White Sands working for the military, not as a civilian in Blanding, I heard about people who went to these sites and brought back parts of the missiles because they were closer to our sites than the other sites. But I think that is the extent of it. They went out there with trucks and brought stuff back in. I was never involved in that part of the recovery.

RM: Is the altitude of what you were tracking still classified?

RA: I don't know. I cannot answer that.

RM: I'm kind of curious what kind of trajectory they would fire. Are we talking a mile off the land, two miles, three miles roughly? What would you guess?

RA: High enough to leave the atmosphere, high enough that they would have to be concerned with burning reentry coming back. You can go from that point.

RM: So they would shoot them up at a high angle with the idea of trying to pin point. Have you gotten any idea about the type of accuracy that these missiles were achieving?

RA: At first I think they were not that accurate. But as we progressed more and more, I've heard that the impact area was getting smaller and smaller and smaller.

RM: So, there was a lot of shifting based on things that had been determined from the firings. There were a lot of changes being introduced.

RA: The previous test was done for this purpose and then they were going to evaluate it and incorporate whatever changes they needed to. I saw data that came back sometimes, that indicated if they fired two weeks ago this was going on a straighter course. I made that assumption by myself.

RM: So within a couple a weeks changes could be made to shift and improve the missile?

RA: Definitely.



RM: Do you have any idea how much a missile cost to fire?

RA: No, but I knew they were pretty expensive. We had pretty expensive missiles. I would say on the average probably \$50,000 just for the missile itself, not including the rest of the personnel and everything else involved. So I think the missiles they were using were pretty high grade stuff. I can't go any further than that.

RM: Do you know when the start and end of the program was?

RA: No. I was in the middle of this thing. I think the firings already occurred when I was hired and then continued after I left. The program then shut down and I was without a job.

RM: You had no interaction at all with what was going on out at Black Mesa. They were involved, if I remember correctly, about that same time, they were firing missiles. Some of them were fired from Green River and others were fired from Black Mesa. There was a regular site out there that was a cantonment area. But you had absolutely no interaction with that group at all?

RA: Not that I can recall. There may have been one or two launches that we did that may have included. I remember the name coming up once in a while, about firings coming out of there but it wasn't to the extent that we were doing in Green River. Green River probably contributed 95% of the missions that I was on.

RM: That's very interesting. And you know I may be a little off on my dates, but it just seems to me that you were both, I say you meaning the group that was up here in Blanding as well as the people that were out there on Black Mesa, operating at the same time. It is just interesting to me that it didn't make a real impact on what you were doing. I would think that you would be tracking their missiles too.

RA: A lot of times we went on a mission and were never told what was occurring. We didn't have to have information of who was launching and when. You had to know when they were launching to set up the equipment. I did not see our radars in action when the mission was going on so I don't know which direction they were pointing at.

RM: Your point of origination would have to pick up the missile as soon as it clears the landscape enough for your radar to pick it up. The Black Mesa site is somewhat south and definitely west of where you were located so your origination site would be much different.

RA: Yes, that's very true.

RM: Is there anything that you would like to share about the experience, about the missiles themselves, about your work area, your experience in Blanding or anything?

RA: No. Just that I was happy and proud to be able to work with the government that was doing something in the missile program. They kept us somewhat out of the loop I guess on some of the stuff that was going on, but the majority of the time we were told what was happening, why it was happening, what some of the results were. It wasn't a CIA operation that kept you completely in the black and not know what was going on. By black I mean in the dark. I had a fun time there. I enjoyed the people that I worked with. They were all friendly. We did our jobs. We didn't interfere with each other. And that was it. We realized that some of the stuff that was occurring was secret. We didn't discuss it amongst ourselves when we were off the site. We didn't discuss it, as far as I know, with anyone else. And when I left the program no one ever inquired what I was doing or why I was doing it, so I never felt anything other than that day what was happening.

RM: You mentioned Eugene Blickenstaff as a security guard. Was your area where the trailers were fenced in?

RA: No. We didn't have a walking guard. I think that area was fenced in but the actual trailers were not. They were, as I recall, all together in the back ends of each other. So we could walk from one trailer to the next trailer on platforms. Actual trailers being fenced around, I don't recall that. There was fencing on the site itself, yes. I don't think there was any fencing around the radar. I can't remember the actual site and where the radar was set, but I don't think I saw any patrols going around fencing. I never recall seeing any individuals out there that did not belong to the site. We had no dogs or anything like that.

RM: Civilians, you say, never came out to the site.

RA: I believe we were posted but I don't recall kids running out in the area or civilians coming out and wandering around. If civilians were there they were probably invited by the site to watch what was going on. But for curiosity sake and while this was occurring I don't recall ever seeing anything like that.

RM: You really didn't have any military people there? Everybody there was a civilian, even the supervisor?

RA: As I recall there were ex-military people there but they were not uniformed military. If they did have them they were inconspicuous. You couldn't tell one from the other. I never saw a military vehicle anywhere around the area. We knew we were doing secret work for the government but to the extent that we were trying to keep a power out or someone trying to get information from us never crossed my mind.

RM: Alright, Rudy. This has been a lot of fun. I appreciate very much you taking some time to share your experience and all. I appreciate very much you sharing it with us.

RA: I'm more than happy to oblige you.